



**Statement of Rep. Alcee L. Hastings
Chairman**

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing: "Business as Usual? Belarus on the Eve of the Elections"
September 16, 2008

Welcome to this Helsinki Commission hearing examining the state of democracy and human rights in Belarus in advance of the September 28 parliamentary elections. This hearing comes at a very interesting time, for a country which has the sad distinction of having the worst domestic human rights record in Europe. Russia's invasion of Georgia and ongoing occupation has changed the dynamics within much of the OSCE region, with even heretofore normally staunch Russian allies such as Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka wary of Moscow's aggression and reluctant to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On a concrete, positive note, the three remaining internationally recognized political prisoners were released, including Belarus' most prominent political prisoner, Alexander Kozulin. As a result, the U.S. has temporarily suspended its ban on two U.S. companies dealing with Belarus' huge state-controlled petrochemical concern, though other sanctions remain in place pending future progress.

Despite some slight improvements, the election environment in Belarus remains significantly problematic. Since I was the one who led the last OSCE election observation mission to Minsk in March 2006, I can tell you that there is much room for improvement. I hope that the Belarusian authorities will take resolute steps to improve the election climate in the short time left. I also remain concerned about imprisoned U.S. citizen Emanuel Zeltser, whose health has reportedly seriously deteriorated and who has been denied his doctor-prescribed medications and regular consular access, and call for his humanitarian release.

The human rights and democracy situation in Belarus is so wanting that it will undoubtedly take a long time and considerable effort to reverse the damage done over the course of the last fourteen years. As I remarked in Minsk in March 2006, the Belarusian people deserve better. However, should the Belarusian authorities display a concrete willingness to begin making progress with respect to their democracy and human rights, the United States should be open to prudent and measured engagement.

So, with the release of the political prisoners, are we witnessing a glimmer of hope for the beginnings of long-awaited change? Or is it business as usual? I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, all of whom – with their extensive experience and deep involvement in encouraging respect for human rights and democratic change in Belarus -- are uniquely qualified to assess the prospects for democratic change in that long-suffering country.

I am delighted to have with us today our fellow Helsinki Commissioner, David Kramer, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. I dare say that there are few, if any, in government with more hands on experience in dealing with Belarus.